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SUBJECT: FRENCH MEETING ON AGRICULTURE IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA FOCUSES
ON REGIONAL MARKETS

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: The French EU Presidency hosted a December 8 high-level meeting on Investing for Agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa. The following day, a seminar on West African regional agricultural policy launched discussion of a regional agricultural policy (ECOWAP) modeled on the EU's Common Agricultural Policy. The forum was attended by a number of Western African agricultural ministers with the stated aim of developing further collaboration between West Africa and the international community on agriculture and food. The G8 Global Partnership for Food and Agriculture (GPAF) initiative was raised only tangentially. French Ag Minister Barnier used the meeting to underscore French support for increased regionalization and regulation of agricultural trade. End summary.

Investing in Agriculture for Sub-Saharan Africa

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¶2. (SBU) Alain Joyandet, Secretary of State for Cooperation and for Francophone Countries, opened the meeting with the announcement that the EU would contribute EURO one billion in aid to developing countries over a three-year period. (Note: This money became available due to lower-than-projected EU agricultural spending due to unusually high commodity prices in 2007. France, among others, initially resisted the diversion of money from this fund for other purposes because it didn't want to set a precedent for doing so. End note.) He emphasized that the current financial crisis and lower commodity prices in 2008 are not excuses for inaction and that the urban poor are particularly vulnerable. While aid has historically been oriented toward the extraction of primary materials rather than local food security, he said, it should be reoriented. He underscored the need to move to more sustainable investment strategies, which should take into account climate change, land tenure issues and insufficient financing, by forming a complex partnership (Note: He did not refer to the GPAF explicitly. End note.)

¶3. (SBU) Subsequent panels, consisting largely of representatives of Africa-based institutions, focused on sectoral investment needs in West Africa, private and public financing opportunities for agricultural infrastructure and business environment issues. In the closing roundtable, Minister Joyandet's Chief of Staff Jean-Marc Chataigner said the discussion reflected the French vision for the G8 Global Partnership for Agriculture and Food. France wanted

"representatives from all sectors to come together in a common effort." Among Chataigner's take-away messages: it is critical to get out of the "model of 20 years ago," strong public/private cooperation is feasible and necessary; rural development issues cannot be viewed in isolation from overall development goals, an integrated approach is critical; long-term engagement is important, the international community must not see this as a one-off crisis. UN High Level Task Force Coordinator David Nabarro emphasized that the HLT was "engaging with those establishing the GPAF to support their efforts."

The West-African Regional Agricultural Policy

14. (SBU) Day two featured a series of speakers discussing implementation of the ECOWAS regional agricultural policy (ECOWAP). Most lauded ECOWAP goals of creating a regional market that could satisfy internal demand and reduce food "dependency." The region's growth model is "no longer viable," with a bottoming out of productivity and rapid degradation of arable land. ECOWAP's regional approach - "a regional offensive for food production" -- is the correct response. The region featured a high degree of complementarity between production and demand areas, and authorities need to create an internal market based on regional preferences. An effective ECOWAP would better regulate supply and demand, and better position ECOWAS on the world stage. The effort should be based on a "post-structural adjustment" approach that includes strong regulation of agricultural markets. This did not mean a return to the regulatory structures of the past, however.

15. (SBU) Agricultural Minister Michel Barnier closed the two-day session, reminding the participants of the conference, "Who will Feed the World?" which was held at the beginning of the French EU presidency. He praised regional integration under ECOWAS, which he encouraged to emulate the EU model. He spoke disparagingly about efforts to revive the Doha negotiations, asserting the ACP countries

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would be "the losers" in a final accord. Asserting that he would never leave agricultural policy to the free market, he stressed that regional entities need to find the right level of protection and regulation in order to promote "regional preference," which is what allowed the EU to reduce its dependence on imports. He concluded that he hoped the Euro one billion would be allocated by the end of the year and that it would not be channeled by international organizations, but rather directly into projects in the field.

16. (SBU) Comment: Barnier has been widely quoted as blaming the world food crisis on the international trading system and using this as a pretext to call for both increased regionalization and regulation of agricultural trade. It appears that France, finding limited receptivity to this point of view within the EC, is now taking its case to developing countries. Reftel description of a French NGO presentation at FAO of a (reportedly GOF-backed) initiative to combat price volatility through an interventionist agricultural trade model provides additional evidence of this strategy.

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